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OUR 'LIBERAL EDUCATION FOR ALL'
MOVEMENT.

GLOUCESTERSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL.

REPORT OF THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE FOR 1917-18.

Extract from Prefatory Note.

IN November 1916 there reached the Education Office from the Parents' National Educational Union three pamphlets descriptive of a scheme of education, founded upon that which had been built up by Miss Charlotte Mason at Ambleside for her Students at the House of Education, and followed by them in home and school, as parents or as teachers, and also by many of the great army of untrained governesses who joined the Union for the sake of its guidance and the standard which its syllabuses and examinations give. One of the pamphlets described the working of this scheme of education by the Staff of the Elementary School in a mining village in Yorkshire. The covering letter claimed that the experiment showed "that it is possible to give to the children of the working classes such an education in *English*, as should make them patriotic and large-minded citizens, with resources for their own leisure and pleasure; that it is possible, in short, to send out persons who having read a good deal, should not readily be carried away by fallacious arguments."

The claim is a large one, but the experience of schools which have worked under the scheme certainly goes far to justify it.

It is Miss Mason's conviction that in the Elementary Schools we underestimate the child's capacity and set our aim too low. She criticises our "plausible and pleasant ways of picturing, eliciting, demonstrating, illustrating, summarising, in fact doing all those things for children, which they are born with the potency to do for themselves"; and she adds that, if we will have courage, "we shall be surprised . . . at the amount of intellectual strong meat almost any child will take at a meal

and digest at his leisure"; and tells us that "teaching and tale, however lucid or fascinating, effect nothing until self-activity be set up, that is, *self-education* is the only possible education; the rest is the mere veneer laid on the surface of a child's nature."

It is not unjust to say that in the Elementary School we have too often been laying a mere veneer. Self-activity, self-education may enter (it is not always that they do) when the children are in the garden, the workshop or the cookery-room, or are engaged upon arithmetic, mensuration or drawing; but save in connection with the garden it is only rarely that they are allowed their proper place in the English teaching, either in reading or in writing. It is but seldom that self-expression is even aimed at. Children of the middle classes have abundant opportunity for it both at home and at school. But to the child from the cottage the home can rarely furnish either stimulus or occasion. And at school he is only one of perhaps 40 or 50 in a class, and the teacher is very apt to do most of the talking. That is a temptation which besets every teacher everywhere, and the larger the class the harder it is to resist. The "chalk and talk" of Mr. Holmes's phrase are the natural refuge of the overburdened. But of course they are fatal to the child's chance of mental development.

Add that the books in use in the Elementary School are usually of a distinctly inferior type, that they are neither so planned nor so used as to exact steady intellectual effort, and that composition, which (whether oral or written) is the foundation of self-expression, often (though happily no longer so often as a few years ago) amounts to little more than the reproduction of the teacher's materials, in the teacher's order, and almost in the teacher's words; and it becomes plain that it is not possible under such conditions to set up self-activity or to do more than lay a mere veneer.

For "an education in English" two things are necessary---good books and intellectual effort on the part of the individual child. The child must thoroughly master the book and its story or argument, and be able to state consecutively and in well chosen language what that story or argument is. Here is the foundation of Miss Mason's method. The books in use are

relatively numerous and expensive (to equip a school costs about 5/- per child) and they are guaranteed by the names of their authors. Self-expression begins with the first sentence read aloud to the youngest child. Its substance is immediately reproduced before the next sentence is read. Later on a paragraph, a page or a chapter is read before the reproduction is exacted, but it always follows; and at the end of each term an examination gathers up the whole of the term's work. There is no escape from close attention. Memory, the power of analysis, of selection, of ordered thought, and of ordered expression, are all called into play, and intellectual development proceeds apace attended by a radiant enjoyment on the part of the children in work, which reveals and creates power through self-activity.

The claims of the scheme were laid before the Chairman, and his permission was obtained to introduce it experimentally into a small number of schools. For a year it has been working in the following:—Cirencester, Watermoor Girls' C. of E., Cam Girls' C. of E., Painswick Girls' Council, Stroud, Badbrook Girls' Council.

In these schools gratifying progress is being made, and results are being obtained which amply justify the claims that are made for the scheme. The gain in interest and intelligence is great; the imagination has been stirred; the vocabulary has been enriched in a very striking way; and the power of expression has developed to an extent that can best be realised if it is said that children are now writing three or four rapid vigorous pages, stamped with their own individuality, where a year ago they would scarcely have written one, and that one without a trace of facility, vigour or self-expression.

To these four schools seventeen more have recently been added, namely:—Almondsbury, Patchway C. of E., Cainscross C. of E., Cirencester Boys' Council, Cirencester Boys' Endowed C. of E., Chalford Hill Council, East Dean, Cinderford Higher Elementary, East Dean, Double View Council, East Dean, Bilson Council, Boys and Girls, East Dean, St. White's Council, East Dean, Trinity C. of E., Kingswood, Hanham Road Girls' Council, Kingswood, High Street Boys' Council, Quenington C. of E., Stroud, Church Street Council, Stroud, Uplands Cotincil, Wollaston Council.

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The syllabuses prepared by Miss Mason for the Parents' Union School and the lists of books selected ensure, what the Union aims at, a liberal education. A standard syllabus, a list of books (although there is a variety of alternatives), and a terminal examination on papers set by Miss Mason might be thought to involve such a surrender of individuality and initiative on the part of the teachers as would alienate their sympathy. It can only be said that this is not in fact the result. It is not necessary here to consider in detail why it is so. Curiously nothing has given more satisfaction to children and teachers than the week of real Examination.

The standard syllabus opens out many interesting possibilities. Where, as at Cinderford, the programmes of the P.U.S. have obtained entrance to what is practically a Secondary School, fed by a group of Elementary Schools around it, a child will follow from its earliest school days up to the age of matriculation a scheme of work planned as a whole by one whose name will assuredly go down to posterity in company with those of the famous educational reformers.

Miss Parish, the Secretary of the Union, has visited all the teachers and has explained and illustrated the methods of the scheme. Her visits have been most fruitful and have given great pleasure. No charge whatever has been made in respect of the expense of these visits or of the terminal syllabuses and other printed matter that has been supplied.

It is impossible not to form the highest hopes of the ultimate fruit of the scheme, when it shall have been at work for four or five years, and children are coming up to the top of the school who were entered to it at the bottom. These children will have learned to use and to love good books, and it would have been a tragedy if books had not been ready to their hands. Happily they will be there, and they will set the crown upon that "liberal education for all" which is the motto of Miss Mason's scheme. The books will come from the Rural Libraries in connection with the schools, which the far-seeing beneficence of the Carnegie United Kingdom Trustees has enabled the Education Committee to call into existence, and which will bring light and joy to many a village home.